

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On the 7th of April of every year we celebrate World Health Day, in our Region and all over the world. This occasion gives us an opportunity to select and highlight an important public health challenge, and to open a dialogue and debate for prevention and health promotion. The theme of World Health Day 2002 is "Move for Health". One of the major leading causes of death and disability in the world today is sedentary life. WHO estimates that 2 million deaths per year are due to lack of physical activity. This is more than those caused by tuberculosis, which is responsible for about 1.7 million deaths per year. Moreover, lack of physical activity in combination with improper diet and smoking, is responsible for the majority of premature coronary heart disease, several cancers, diabetes, high blood pressure, blood lipid disorders, osteoporosis, depression and anxiety.

It is estimated that over 60% of the world's population is not physically active enough to gain health benefits, and this is especially true for girls and women. Most of the Eastern Mediterranean Region countries are undergoing rapid changes in lifestyle and social conditions. The cause of change can be attributed to the consequences of rapid socioeconomic changes, including urbanization and globalization of media and economy. Mortality and morbidity due to communicable diseases are decreasing and life expectancy is on the rise. At the same time, eating habits are changing. Sedentary life is becoming an unavoidable way of living in the cities. Growing access to media and communication tools has changed living and entertainment habits all over the world, and our Region is no exception. Tobacco and substance abuse are among the major social and health problems in many countries of the Region.

Overweight and obesity are growing concerns in most countries. Not all countries in the Region have nationally representative data, but existing information shows that most countries in the Region have levels of adult overweight and obesity greater than 30%. The rate of obesity in adult females approaches 40% in some countries of the Region. It is important to note that obesity and overweight is not only a problem for affluent communities. Studies show that those countries in the Region still suffering from high prevalence of malnutrition and battling with the burden of communicable diseases may face an epidemic of noncommunicable diseases in the near future. This double burden of disease, if not addressed properly, will devastate those countries.

Existing evidence strongly associates sedentary life and noncommunicable diseases with poverty, violence, lack of space, environmental pollution, inadequate access to health care services and weak cooperation between the different sectors and partners responsible. Unfortunately there is a lack of awareness about the importance of the physical activity as a preventive measure for healthy lifestyle. Political commitment and support is weak because there is insufficient data on trends, levels and determinants of physical activity in different communities. There is insufficient cooperation among the different sectors involved and in some communities, and last but not least, social and cultural beliefs in different communities may not allow everyone, regardless of age and sex, to participate in physical activities.

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Prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases starts before a person is born. We need to have a life cycle approach, starting with pregnancy, breastfeeding and child nutrition, and proceeding into old age, when healthy eating and active living are among the most important aspects of healthy aging.

Despite what has been portrayed in the global media in recent decades, we don't need to be professional athletes or aerobics trainers to be physically active. Thirty minutes of moderate physical activity, such as walking, every day or most days of the week, is equally beneficial for our health. Even the busiest individuals can incorporate thirty minutes of physical activity into their daily routine.

Sedentary life however is not only about individual behaviour. Crowded living places, environmental pollution, lack of parks and sidewalks, and last but not least insecurity and crime contribute to this unhealthy lifestyle. Focused prevention and health promotion activities have not been on the agenda of priorities for policy-makers. The future challenge in this respect is to realize the importance of acting today for the future benefits, and to recognize prevention as an equal challenge for governments and for individuals. The different partners concerned, including the health sector, should link and harmonize their plans and activities. These partners include local government, the education, transport, sport, industry and commerce sectors, and civil society.

I hope that we will take the message of World Health Day 2002 as a starting point to include physical activity as an integral part of disease prevention and health promotion programmes, for healthier individuals and communities.

Thank you.

Saturday 11th of May 2024 01:18:08 PM